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ONCE MORE TO THE WELL--ANOTHER LOOK AT CREATIVE WRITING.

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CAUGHT IN THE PRESSURE FOR TEACHING MORE EXPOSITORY PROSE, THE HIGH SCHOOL ENGLISH TEACHER IS IN DANGER OF REQUIRING A KIND OF COMMUNICATION FROM STUDENTS THAT DEADENS THEIR CREATIVITY. HOWEVER, WHEN CREATIVE WRITING IS TAUGHT WELL, IT REQUIRES AS MUCH STUDENT EFFORT AND PLANNING AS DOES EXPOSITORY WRITING. THE TEACHER CAN BEST TEACH CREATIVE WRITING BY SHARPENING THE STUDENTS' OBSERVATIONAL POWERS, STORY-TELLING FACULTIES, SENSE OF FORM, AND ABILITY TO USE LANGUAGE EFFECTIVELY. IN TEACHING THE SHORT STORY, ASSIGNMENTS CAN BE DEVISED TO ILLUSTRATE THE NEED FOR STUDENTS TO KNOW THEIR MATERIALS THOROUGHLY, TO NOTE CHANGES IN MOVEMENT WHEN DESCRIBING ACTION, TO PERCEIVE FORCES WHICH WORK TOGETHER TO MAKE A STORY, AND TO UNDERSTAND THE CONFLICTS AND SETTINGS OF WELL-KNOWN SHORT STORIES BEFORE WRITING THEIR OWN. IN TEACHING POETRY, PROJECTS CAN BE DESIGNED TO ENCOURAGE THE STUDENTS' SENSITIVITY, THEIR INTEREST IN LANGUAGE SOUNDS, AND THEIR PERCEPTION OF SUBTLE RELATIONSHIPS BETWEEN WORDS OR IMAGES. (THIS ARTICLE APPEARED IN THE "ENGLISH JOURNAL," VOL. 50 (DECEMBER 1961), 612, 617-19, 637.) (JB)

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Once More to the Well: Another Look at Creative Writing

R. Stanley Peterson

The author views with trepidation the lessening emphasis on "creative" writing, although he declares no prejudice against expository writing. He suggests several specific possibilities for stimulating creative writing. Mr. Peterson is Head of the Department of English, New Trier High School, Winnetka, Illinois.

I AM GROWING a little weary of the charge that Johnny can't read very well, and I am also a little weary of the charge that he can't write, especially when the added bill of particulars includes "creative" writing as chief reason for the crime. What Johnny needs in most cases is more "creative" writing, not less.

The charge against "creative" writing springs mostly from college instructors who discover in freshman themes a frightening lack of planning, organization; logical thinking, coherence, unity, emphasis—the traditional subject matter interest in college composition courses. "Plan! Be logical! Be clear!" they say.

About what? I am reminded of good Brother Lippo, who had to paint what pleased his superiors, until finally he had to sneak into the corners of his paintings some of the personal expression that would breathe life into them. Is there not danger that the high school teacher and his students, caught in the pressure for more and more expository writing, will produce a kind of communication art that is moribund?

Other factors are perhaps responsible for Johnny's sad condition, and it might just be that the very tonic he needs is more "creative" writing. The Commission on English has stated that half of the English teachers of the country are not well prepared to teach English. Add to this very alarming statistic the probable truth that few teachers of writing are accomplished writers themselves, and the charge against poor Johnny takes on a new perspective. No, Johnny is not entirely to blame.

Johnny also has a harder time concentrating on his writing than his father did, and this fact may be another reason why he doesn't write as well. He has been surrounded since birth with positive proof that writing is no longer necessary for most people, and that the time may well come very soon when reading will be an unnecessary skill. He has been brought up to believe that there is a string of moving pictures reaching from Hollywood to Cannes that will tell him all he needs to know about life. He has learned, too, that there are enough sound waves coming through the air to keep him up to date on the news and the latest song hits.

For some few students the moving pictures, television, and radio have meant enrichment beyond the comprehension of men fifty or sixty years ago. But not so for the vast majority of boys and girls, who have been led into a stubborn, passive acceptance of the headline, the moving shadows, and the hired performances of sports experts and artists. The ritual of twentieth century entertainment has led to making men dull to sensation. Why, then, should anyone be surprised that teaching writing grows more and more difficult? Why should the profes-

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sor wonder why so many college freshmen do not know how to write well?

I insist: there are all kinds of reasons why Johnny does not do well, but "creative" writing is not one of the chief causes. It is not even a minor cause, except perhaps when it is taught as an escape for adolescent maunderings, free association, or automatic writing. For "creative" writing well taught requires planning, and form, and emphasis—in fact, all and more than is required in expository writing. I would not abolish expository writing, to be sure, but I plead for more attention being returned to the "creative" approach.

Where Do We Begin?

Creative writing ought to begin at the beginning—or almost as soon as the child is born—but just in case parents have not opened the eyes of their children to the world around them, the teacher ought to assume that obligation as having first priority. The great, big, wide, wonderful world has to be opened up for them to see, to hear, to smell, to feel, to taste—because out of this solid content alone can come rich and effective writing.

The world of people should be their next concern, and they must learn to watch people at work or at play—their friends, their teachers, their parents, developing a kind of kodachrome perceptiveness to the actions of men. And beasts, too, their cats, their dogs, their hamsters and white-hooded rats, or whatever the inventiveness of children or the pamperings of parents have provided.

Creative writing can begin, too, with looking in the mirror, with searching for interesting introspections and autobiographical incidents that have been remembered with pleasure or with pain.

Out of such beginnings will come short stories, poems, and essays that are personal and honest, and by and by, when these young authors are asked to criticize a novel for an English professor, they will be able to say, "This author is false: he does not see the world clearly." "This author knows what he is talking about: I recognize the world he describes." "This author creates a world of the imagination which I am able to appreciate because I have learned to look at my own world and listen to my heart."

Expository writing alone will not teach such reading of literature.

How Do We Proceed?

We must capitalize on the story-telling faculty that lies in everyone—the wish to entertain, to give pleasure, to recount what has happened. If the students have not had lively grandmothers who have told them about gory border feuds, then they must be lured into the story-telling game by assignments that will send them out into the school or the community looking for news or into the pages of the newspapers searching for human interest stories. Class time will not be lost that encourages the inventive raconteur.

And then we must foster a sense of form. I dare say that the chief reason creative writing has been so often attacked by university professors is that it has been limited in high school to a kind of free response that follows an emotional experience; either that or a limiting of subject matter to personal anecdote of the "What I like to eat best" variety or the "What I did during my summer vacation" type. Writing that springs haphazardly from trivial experience or fails to excite the imagination doubtless deserves the criticism; but there is no reason why creative writing cannot be better taught. The sense of form will come from the close correlation between the study of literature and the study of writing, for poetry and the short story and the essay are art forms which must be studied, analyzed, interpreted, and criticized before they can be created anew.

Finally, we must make creative writing the outlet for language study. What a difference there is between this point

of view from the insistence upon formal grammar and diagramming of sentences as the road to good writing! For not only is expository writing only one approach to writing: grammar too is only one, and usage, vocabulary effectiveness, the power of the metaphor, the insight into irony, understatement, paradox, and humor go to make effective style.

What Assignments?

Creative writing does not succeed unless there is adequate preparation in class through reading, discussion, and planning. Pupils must master one thing at a time, and the skillful teacher will take these factors into account in making assignments. Here are five assignments, lasting over one week, which will illustrate the approach to teaching the short story.

1. Blindfold a member of the class. Lead him to a large map of the world posted on the blackboard. Have him place his finger on the map and thus determine the location of his short story. What is wrong with this plan? Discuss the the probable failure of such a story because of inadequate content material. Offer the suggestion that there is always the encyclopedia to turn to for such information. Bring out the necessity of knowing the world the pupils are to write about.

Offer as an assignment: Reconstruct the scene which you return to in your memory whenever you think about summer vacation. Assume a definite position on the top of a hill or standing beside a bank or lying on your back looking up through the trees.

2. Promote an exercise in class of noting movement, describing action, observing changes. Arrange with one member of the class to come in late, create a small sensation by what he says or does, and then take his seat in the classroom. Discuss with the class the actions observed. Note the errors in observation, the omissions in details.

Offer as an assignment: Go back to the scene described in the previous assignment. Describe (in one paragraph) the motion which you observe in the scene —the traffic on the highway, the sailboat luffing in the wind, the sudden appearance of a canoe, the moving clouds.

3. Draw two lines on the blackboard —two horizontal and parallel lines. If these lines represent two people walking down the street in opposite directions, show how nothing interesting happens unless those lines in some way intersect. Discuss with the class the forces that might make the lives of the two people come together. In other words, what will bring about some conflict between the two forces?

Offer as an assignment: Bring to class a list of three or four possible problems that might arise out of the scene created in assignment "2," a traffic jam, a disabled or overturned boat, an abandoned car. Be prepared to elaborate upon some events that might spring from each problem.

4. Call upon pupils to discuss characteristic actions of people they know. Let them concentrate on facial expressions, qualities of voice, movements of hands, peculiarities in walk, habitual actions.

Offer as an assignment: Observe a student in study hall, an animal moving in its cage, a teacher before the class. Come to class prepared to describe in words or in pantomime the actions which you have observed.

5. Take a well-known story and discuss the movement of the story in class. Practice reducing the story to a few sentences. Recall specific

details about the setting, point out the conflict that makes the story possible (or inevitable), draw brief character sketches of the two or three characters presented, explain how the problem of the story is finally worked out.

Offer as an assignment: The following situation presents itself. How would you finish the story?

A small boy of ten, kicking his way through the leaves on his way home from school, looks up when he discovers that someone is standing in front of him in the path.

The final whistle is about to blow. There is time for only one more shot. There is a man under the basket. Does the man with the ball pass or take a long shot? (The story is what goes on in his mind in those last few seconds.)

Whether the teacher decides to have everyone write a short story or end at this point, the great advantages of the creative writing project have been attained. Not everyone can follow through with a complete story, and the teacher should leave the final story to those who have been motivated to the point of writing a story of their own.

What about Poetry?

Poetry starts with a fondness for the sound of language. It grows when the young writer perceives relationships others may not have noticed, and it develops with the growing sensitiveness and understanding. Exercises which will promote these three stages will make more effective writers, and even though not all will turn out to be poets, all will benefit from the study of writing poetry and their prose style will improve in richness and warmth.

The following exercises are typical of the things a teacher can do to get students sometimes to the point of writing fairly respectable original verse.

1. A search of the dictionary will turn up some surprising sentences. For example this one from the *American College Dictionary: kino gum*, the reddish or black catechu-like inspissated juice or gum of certain tropical trees, especially that obtained from *Peterocarpus marsupium*, a tall fabaceous tree of India and Ceylon; used in medicine, tanning, etc.

Offer as an assignment: turn the definition into rhythmical language, with such a starter as the following:

Our kino gums are reddish black
They're dried to juicy goos—
They come from far-off India,
From the beanlike catechus.
They have some use in medicine
Perhaps to cure kerchoos;
But may be best for tanning
Imported kangaroos.

2. Words themselves appeal to the ear. They can give pleasure even when there is no apparent sensible meaning. Again, the search of the dictionary will result in a list of words that when read aloud give a pleasing sound.

Offer as an assignment: Put the following words in a succession that is most pleasing to the ear.

jaborandi, jacamar, jacaranda, jaw

3. Words change in meaning as the context changes. The obvious denotative meaning becomes richer and richer as the context widens and the word takes on fringe meanings.

a house
an old house
the poor house
the big house
the White House

Offer as an assignment: Using synonyms for *house*, show the progression from the poorest covering over a peas-

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Once More to the Well—

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ant's head to the most palatial structure you can imagine that would still be the house of a man.

4. The language of poetry is highly metaphorical, either by direct comparison or implication. Man is at one time or another all of the following animals—not entirely, of course, but partly—and it is this significant "partly" that is brought out by the direct or implied comparison. Man is a rooster, a donkey, an elephant, an ox, an ant, a dog, a lion, a fox, and each time he is something different.

Offer as an assignment: What is woman? What is spring? What is death? What is fear? What is kindness? What is honor? What is love?

5. There are some things that cannot be explained, like the rust that gets into a man's soul or the purple fear he feels or the white smarting hurt from a friend or the quick spurt of a match that lights the way to the unknown. These attempts at definition fall in the realm of poetry. There the obscure thought can find expression or not at all.

Offer as an assignment: What is your protective coat against the rain and the sun and the wind that you do not rust? How can you explain the unexplainable except in terms of what we all understand?

I have no quarrel with expository writing. I think it is necessary to explain why John Keats was affected by the ungrateful article in the *Edinburgh Review*. I think every student should know how to explain why Caesar had to cross the river and what would happen to him if he did not. I recognize the importance of expository writing to businessmen and lawyers, engineers and architects, clubwomen and editorial writers, but there is a feeling man or woman needing an education, too, and for this kind of education there must be creative writing—not, I say, to make poets and short story writers and novelists, but to make them more sensitive human beings instead of automatons.